

INTERVIEWS

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Sheetal Sheth Tells All

RACHEL BEEBE



With her big brown eyes, flawless skin and a quirky smile that would make any dyke weak in the knees, actor Sheetal Sheth launched onto the lesbian cinema scene as Layla in the hit romantic comedy *I Can't Think Straight*. The story, which is based on director Shamim Sarif and producer Hanan Kattan's own relationship, follows the bashful budding writer as she encounters, falls for and then woos the gorgeous Tala, played by international sensation Lisa Ray. The duo had so much chemistry on screen that Sarif cast them together again in *The World Unseen*, a drama set in Apartheid-era South Africa. Sheth is no stranger to controversial roles. In 1999's *ABCD* she played a promiscuous young girl struggling with family expectations and tradition, and in then in 2005, she caught the attention of audiences everywhere in Albert Brooks' *Looking for Comedy in*

the Muslim World. Now, the award-winning actor answers our questions, including what draws her to lesbian roles and what it's like working with (and kissing) Lisa Ray.

In your new film *I Can't Think Strait*, both Leyla and Tala had to choose between being true to themselves and being a part of their conservative families. Have you ever had to make a choice like that?

I certainly have had to make some hard choices and decisions. And I think for me, what I draw from Leyla, it's just about trying to live your truest life. A lot of that sometimes doesn't fall into what people expect of you or people have an idea for you, whether it be friends or family or, you know, so many people in your life that mean something to you that don't necessarily approve of your choices... But at the end of the day, for me, if I can sleep at night and know that I'm just being as authentic as I can be, and then living as truthfully and kindly and with the integrity that I want to, then that's all you can really do. And it's hard. Some days are harder than others, but that's the point in realizing that a lot of that stuff really has nothing to do with you and has to do with the other people's kind of ideas. I just very early on decided to define success for myself and that's really given me the freedom to not worry about all that stuff as much.

What was amazing about Leyla was that she was so authentic to herself, she just seemed to make this decision, I'm not going to do this anymore. And it's something you've got to respect.

Yea, I think it's interesting because for her, you know, as kind of awkward and introverted as she is, definitely in the beginning, there was always a fire with her, which is what immediately drew me to her in the script. She always had this spirit and it was all there, it was just a matter of her finding a way for her to kind of express it, you know.

I read that several actresses turned down the role of Leyla because of the lesbian sex scenes, what it was that made you take it.

You know Shamim told me that, but I was surprised because I didn't think of it that way. You know, it didn't even occur to me to just mention it, because I just read the script and thought, "wow what a beautiful love

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story.” So it didn’t occur to me, I didn’t even mention it, and when we were rehearsing and working on it and, for me, if I’m with a stranger if it’s a guy or a woman it’s the same [laughs]... I mean, love is love. You would hope that’d be the case for people, so being in a love scene with a guy or woman honestly, that I don’t know, is the same. I’ve done so many love scenes with guys, that, it honestly just didn’t even occur to me. I just thought what a beautiful love story, this just happens to be a woman, and it’s equally as telling. I just wanted to be a part of it.

So was it a challenge for you to play a lesbian just starting to come out?

I didn’t look at it that way... When I thought about Leyla and when I was working on her I thought, okay, I’m playing a woman that is trying to be herself in the fullest truest way, and I can relate to that. And I can relate to that period of time in between where you’re just finding your way and just kind of going through it... The coming out scene was hard. Not because it was a coming out scene but because of the emotions that it brought up.

The scene where she came out to her mother and father?

Yea, and it’s interesting because the scene actually in the script is even much longer than what’s in the movie, and so there was a lot that we did and again it wasn’t about coming out, it was about just basically having to you know get at the top of the building, at the top of whatever, and just say “This is who I am. Listen. Why aren’t you seeing me?” You know, and these are people that you love more than anything and you’re trying to actually reach out and share and they’re not seeing it. So that was really poignant and really moving because I understand that and...That scene in particular is dear to me, just because I feel like we can all understand that feeling of like, “why can’t you see me?”

And to some extent everybody goes through that with their parents at some point in their life.

With their parents, with their families, with their significant others, with their—whatever, It happens all the time and this was just the heightened point of it and it’s about the people that can press your buttons the deepest, know exactly how to and they still do, you know. It hurts the most.



Actors Lisa Ray and Sheetal Sheeth canoodle in *I Can't Think Strait*

There has been some critical debate about whether or not I Cant Think Strait balanced the harder hitting political, cultural questions and questions about sexuality it asked, with kind of the humor that it used to mediate those things. Can a lesbian romantic comedy, take on those bigger issues and still be lighthearted?

You know, I certainly respect everyone’s opinions, you know, as long as it’s coming from an objective, intelligent place. Every movie isn’t for everyone. Some people like apples and some people like oranges, it is what it is. What we hope to do with the film is to generate number 1, a moving film that helps kind of maybe if it gives you one piece of something to take away in your own life and just see what you can do to live truer or



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**lesbians...
finding
real
love!**

fuller or whatever's the case, then great, we did our job. Now I find, generally speaking, if movies make people uncomfortable, it's usually because they're dealing with something they don't want to deal with, or seeing something, or you know, it hits home... I thought it was refreshing to have the kind of banter that Leyla and Tala did. At the end of the day, they were falling in love, and it's a story about that. But the political backdrop of it I thought was so interesting because it's what's happening, it's relevant, it's current, and it's what would be happening, it's realistic. And you know again, a slice of life of this story might not be something anyone ever experiences, they don't think it exists... You know, everyone has their place and their voice, but I think that the movie you know is important and I think it's worth seeing, I really do, and I'm being objective I think. I think there's something in it for everyone.

How was working with Lisa Ray? Lisa and I have very different approaches and very different ways about just working and approaching material which is always great... the more ideas and the more things you can throw into the pot, I think is good. And so, this was our first movie together, and so we were kind of feeling each other out a little bit more which I think worked as far as the dynamic of the characters in this movie.

How did it compare to working together in *A World Unseen*?

We did it second, [and] our characters meet and it's much more of a subtle, they meet, and you know it feels like they've known each other forever and it's not as in your face... Which is interesting because I think, our friendship had come to a point where we knew each other really well, and we worked together really well and it worked for that relationship.

Well you guys definitely have great charisma onscreen and I think the sex scenes are great in the movie. What was the hardest part about getting them right.

Like with anyone, whether it be Lisa, or another girl, or another guy that I work with, I mean Lisa's a beautiful woman so it's certainly not hard to kiss her, you know [laughs]. It's just about getting comfortable, and having the trust that we're both there and we're both going to just do what's necessary... The good thing is, we were just cool enough that I could be like, "alright Lisa, just, I might grab you here, whatever." She's like, "just do what you've got to do."

So you felt really comfortable with her?

I felt comfortable in the situation. Shamim, the director, I think that's who kind of sets the tone and she was really generous and really open to whatever we needed to make it happen. And we kind of said a couple of things, what points do you want us to hit and we'll fill in the rest, and we kind of just went with it.

Did working on the film make you rethink anything about your own sexuality?

I mean I'm always looking at myself, you know, and just kind of examining who I am. I'm pretty sure of my sexuality but I definitely feel like I, I don't know I've always been really open... I don't get it when people try to decide for other people how to live their lives. I've never ever understood it. I've always been like, listen, if it's good for them it's not hurting anybody else, then why do you care? You know, let everyone just live the lives that they want. And, I've always been that way and kind of doing this movie made it even more important, and more dear to me.

It's funny because we did it a couple of years ago and it came out now, and the whole thing coming out with Prop 8 and so forth. It made me more adamant and more proud of the fact that we made a movie having to deal with certain things. And I felt like, it's interesting because you could sit here with somebody and you could debate right, wrong, this, that, just whatever. And it's hard to kind of put, when you're trying to convince someone or trying to explain a fact to someone it's hard for them to understand it unless they have a personal story attached.

You could sit here and say women should be able to get married, and all this stuff, but then maybe seeing a movie or reading a book and getting attached and finding something that moves them about a character is like, 'okay, maybe I get that. They do deserve to be happy, they do deserve to have a life.' ... it's having that personal connection whether it be through film or movies or music or personal interaction, that's the juice, right. So, I was so happy that the movie came out when it did because I think it's important especially now. And I personally think that the gay civil rights movement is the next big fight. And it upsets me that it's even a fight and it's a discussion. November 5, when I woke up I was terribly excited and terribly disappointed, I couldn't believe it... we're in California of all places, I mean I can understand, not that I think it's right anywhere, but I can understand certain parts of the country having more issue, but we're in California! So it hurt my heart, it really did. And it hurts my heart when I hear people that I know say certain things. And I'm like, really? It just made me more, kind of involved, and more proud and more vocal and all of the above.



Lisa Ray and Sheetal Sheth reunited for *The World Unseen*

I think you're right, I think it is the next big fight, and hopefully the next administration is, going to take that on and make some change.

It's interesting the amount of people that feel like they need to say certain things to pander to the masses. I looked at Barack and Biden and I personally, there's no way in my opinion they really believe that gay marriage is wrong. I just think they said it because they needed to say it at the time. Really, come on, I don't believe it for a second. And I understand why, it's certainly upsetting that they felt like they had to but they did, and I think there's no way they'd believe that people shouldn't be allowed to get married and have the same rights. I mean, come on. Let's hope.

I read that the Indian American community was a little bit offended by your role in *ABCD*, and I was wondering what the response has been to *I Can't Think Straight*?

You know, it varies. Again like with *ABCD* it was very polarizing, as was this, and you get some extremes on both sides and the truth I guess is somewhere in the middle. There's certainly the people that think we're sick and crazy and this doesn't exist in the world and why would you perpetuate it and all that horrible stuff. And the other side of oh my god, I'm so happy, thank you thank you thank you thank you, I've never seen anything like this and it makes me feel like I can and there's hope, so you have both. And again, like I've said before, the ones that are the other negative extreme really just, it's a dialogue that I'm glad they've had in their life because it will start the process. They've just got a longer way to go. And the other end, thank god, this is why we do what we do, I'm glad it helped.

Have you gotten a lot of response from fans?

I met this woman, I went to see the movie with a friend of mine and there was a woman in the lobby and I walked in and she was really excited to see me and I said, "oh, you've seen the movie?" And she said, "it's my seventh time." And I said [laughs] I haven't seen it seven times... it was almost like she was there taking notes or just trying to figure out a way to figure out how she was going to do her thing. Such a doll and at the end of it my friend and I were talking to her and I said what is it about it and she said, "because I don't see these stories and it's important and I need it and it's real." It was nice I thought. We've had so many people like that, people that I've just randomly met, people who see me on the street to the fan emails, letters, stuff, it really, and not just from the gay communities, across the board. It's really, really great.

There aren't a lot of actors of Indian descent on the screen at the moment. Do you think that that's because the roles aren't there, or because casting directors aren't casting outside the white box?

I think it's everything. I think that, as a minority, that we didn't start to immigrate here until the late '60s and '70s so we're kind of the first generation that's come about and unlike some of the other minorities, like the Latina community and African Americans who have been here a lot longer. I'm the first generation of a group of people that have started to kind of grow up and started to kind of maybe wander outside of the box that's normally expected of half Asians.

Number two—At the end of the day, the old adage is what's the only color Hollywood sees? And it's green. I think to be perfectly frank, I think that you could put me or several other people onscreen that look like me and there would be no problem. If the movies good and we're good I don't think any American audiences are going to be like, "I don't want to see that girl onscreen." I really don't. I think that they're used to certain

formulas and I think that they're used to a certain thing, they want it to be safe, and they're just going to stick with that. So it's almost one of those things that you have to show them, guess what there's an audience and guess what it doesn't have to be the same audience of their ethnicity... People will go see it if it's a good movie, it's a good movie. If it's good acting, it's good acting. People really don't care. I think people just watch something and want to get something from it. I think that there's really low expectations of the audiences, generally. I think we're smarter than people give us credit for, I think that we're more open and more open minded than people give us credit for.

What new projects are you working on?

Actually I have a movie coming out next month called *The Trouble With Romance* and it's this really sweet ensemble piece about four different relationships, I play a hooker looking for love. We did it with director Gene Rhee and it's got a really great cast. It has Jen Siebel and Kip Pardue and Josie Davies, David Eigenberg, really great cast. Warner Brothers picked it up... So it's right around the corner.

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POSTED BY ANONYMOUS

MAY 10, 2009 03:26 AM

Very good interview. Sheetal had demonstrated her open-minded and depth through her talking and responses to the questions. Very obvious that she had seen something in the character a character... I like the points she made that the movie is not made for everyone, and you can like it or dislike it but it is what it is and it gives audiences some take away. It is so true that you can feel so passionate about a movie if your personal life is attached to it one way or the other. Thanks for speaking so openly and for valuable comments. By the way, you look great in the movie and the older you grow the better you look! Oh, having had a chance to kiss and touch Lisa is not bad, isn't it!?:)

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POSTED BY ANONYMOUS

JUN 29, 2009 04:27 AM

Sheetal is a pretty amazing woman, and maybe Lisa and Sheetal are wonderful actresses with the terribly chemistry.

Wish they could be together in reality!

Love your guys!

POSTED BY ANONYMOUS

JUN 29, 2009 04:36 AM

I just watched the films several days ago, which is mesmerizing, I have watched about 14 times, and maybe I will keep on ^_^ Sheetal and Lisa are worthy to be crazy for them, right?

Wish more and more people can pay attention to the films, I CAN'T THINK STRAIGHT, THE WORLD UNSEEN!

Do believe they are worthy!

I am waiting for the series of I CAN'T THINK STRAIGHT, hoping Lisa and Sheetal can join in again!

POSTED BY ANONYMOUS

JUN 29, 2009 04:39 AM

Amazing chemistry~~~

Maybe sth happened between them, xd!

POSTED BY ANONYMOUS

JUN 29, 2009 09:34 PM

wonderful interview!

Though your questions, the answers are more skillful, we still can not get the point!

anyway, I love the films, I love ss, lol~~

POSTED BY ANONYMOUS

AUG 10, 2009 11:22 AM